



Death by plastic

Albatross carcasses reveal a deadly diet of our lighters, bottle caps and sundry other plastics we discard

BY ROSETTE ROYALE
STREET NEWS SERVICE

Chris Jordan's odyssey from Seattle to a small island in the North Pacific Ocean teeming with dead and dying seabirds was fueled by an unlikely siren: plastic.

Since 2003, Jordan has amassed a body of photographs that have investigated the United States' growing addiction to mass consumption. A river of discarded cell phones, a sea of colored glass bottles, an army of Barbie dolls: all these and more, in large-format documentary photos or digital recreations, have pointed to Americans' propensity to buy goods that end up as mountains of garbage.

But Jordan, 48, said that even though his work has been well received, he's always been challenged by the enormity of helping people understand the role we play in creating — and ending — our cycle of trash. He knew that plastic as a potent symbol of society's excess. A group of scientists he met agreed.

When the topic of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch came up, that mythic gyre of marine trash that swirls over an indeterminate area of the Pacific, Jordan lamented there was no way to photograph the entire maelstrom. A scientist spoke up: "She said, 'If you want to see the garbage patch up close, go look inside the stomachs of dead baby birds on Midway Island,'" Jordan recalled.

Surprised by the woman's words, Jordan went to the Internet. A search turned up images of dead birds on Midway that showed their guts littered with undigested plastic. Surely, he thought, those images were altered. He could only think of one way to verify the pictures: visit Midway.

Past and present

The trip would, in one sense, be a journey back in history. In June 1942, six months after the Japanese Imperial Navy attacked Pearl Harbor, the U.S. Navy defeated the Japanese fleet during the Battle of Midway. Numerous military historians consider the U.S. action on the island atoll a decisive moment in determining the outcome of WWII.

By the time Jordan flew to Midway in the fall of 2009, the 2.4-square-mile island still held the former naval air station, along with a hotel — and millions of seabirds. The majority of them were various species of albatross, a large seabird, some with wingspans that reach 12 feet.

As he walked around the island, Jordan discovered the images he'd seen on the Web hadn't been altered. Midway was an above-ground mausoleum of birds. Scattered among their wind-ravaged feathers and decaying bones, lay bright, colored pieces of plastic: cigarette lighters, bottle caps, washers, even a plastic teddy bear.

Jordan photographed what he saw, vowing not to add or remove any plastic from the carcasses. Sometimes, he would remove the bird's breastplate, to better reveal the plastic waste it had consumed, but otherwise he left the carcass alone. Gazing at a once living creature brought down by the detritus of modern human life was a mirror.

"It's like looking into our souls," Jordan said.

The photos became part of the collection "Midway: Message from the Gyre." He posted the images on the Internet and they went viral. In response, he received thousands of e-mails, many asking a variation of a question: After seeing such loss of life caused by human waste, how do we find a sense of hope?



The questions were heartbreaking, but Jordan didn't want his work to paralyze viewers, but rather spur them to action. So he decided to return to Midway, to tell more stories from the island.

Crossroads

Jordan has now visited Midway six times. Aided by a crew, he's filmed and photographed the perils of avian life on the island. This imagery will be part of the film "Midway," the trailer of which can be viewed at midwayfilm.com. He's started an online campaign to raise \$100,000 to finance the work.

Even with the film in its early stage, Jordan and his crew have captured moving images. One video shows a mother albatross that fed her chick a meal that contained fishing line. The line runs like a deadly tether from the mother's beak to the chick's. Jordan and an assistant remove the line from the mother, but they found that the line was wrapped around the chick's tongue. Eventually, they cut the line in hopes the chick will survive. They later learn the line could be dental floss.

Above top, the decomposed body of an albatross showing the contents of its stomach, including a discarded lighter and bottle caps. "It's like looking into our souls," says photographer Chris Jordan. Above, an albatross and a baby huddle on the remote Midway Atoll.

PHOTOS BY CHRIS JORDAN

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